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NEW GUINEA MASKS

BY

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FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

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RELIGIOUS PROCESSION WITH FEATHER MASKS LEAVING THE SACRED ENCLOSURE AT AWAR, NEW GUINEA.

THE JOSEPH N. FIELD HALL

PREFACE

There are few places, if any, less affected by modern civilization than certain islands of the South Seas, especially New Guinea. In the interior of this large island the inhabitants are still living in the stone age as truly as the ancient inhabitants of Europe did in neolithic times. Civilization, however, is rapidly penetrating this region. On the coasts of New Guinea, and in the neighboring islands, the old life is passing away—in many places has already done so—and little or nothing now remains to tell the tale, unless it be in the memory of the older generation.

In 1909 the Museum was enabled under the patronage of Mr. Joseph N. Field, to extend its work into the South Pacific Islands. An expedition, known as the Joseph N. Field South Pacific Expedition, under the leadership of Dr. Albert B. Lewis, spent four years, 1909-13, in the South Pacific, chiefly in the following Melanesian Islands:—Fiji, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, New Britain, New Ireland, New Hanover, St. Matthias, the Admiralty Islands, and New Guinea. The object of the expedition was to obtain whatever possible, both of collections and information, that would help to illustrate the life, activities, and beliefs of the inhabitants of this region, as they had been when uninfluenced by European culture. The most important result of the Joseph N. Field Expedition is a collection of more than ten thousand specimens. In addition to these the Museum was also able through Mr. Field to acquire some fine old collections supplementing those obtained in the field. Representative exhibits from the different Mela-

nesian Islands, comprising chiefly specimens from these collections, but also including many from other sources, have been installed in the Joseph N. Field Hall. The remainder have been placed where they can be seen and consulted, when necessary.

To supplement the exhibits, it is the purpose to publish short leaflets giving illustrations end explanations of the use of certain objects or groups of objects. No endeavor will be made to treat the subject exhaustively, but by means of illustrations and descriptions the reader will be enabled to picture to himself more vividly and realistically the life of these people. The present leaflet dealing with New Guinea masks is the first instalment of this series.

B. LAUFER.

FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
CHICAGO, 1922

LEAFLET NUMBER 4

New Guinea Masks

(Joseph N. Field Hall, Cases 13, 42, 47, 85, 88)

The use of masks of different kinds, while not universal, is found in certain parts of New Guinea, especially the central portion, both north and south. The masks are used in different ways and for different purposes. Sometimes their use is for purely comic or humorous representations or in imitative dances, but usually they have more or less of a mysterious or religious significance, in that they are supposed to represent spirits or supernatural beings, who for one reason or another are paying a visit to their friends or worshipers.

Not infrequently the use of masked figures is associated with secret societies, the members of which are in this manner enabled to impose upon the rest of the people for their own selfish interests. In such cases the supernatural element is invoked, and the acts of the maskers are supposed to be sanctioned by the spirits. Even if there is no definitely organized secret society, there is at least a certain group who are on the inside, so to speak, and who are the only ones allowed within the enclosures where the masks are made and kept, and where the preparation for the appearance of the maskers takes place. Very frequently this includes most of the adult male population.

Often several types of masks may be found among the same people. In certain places on the Papuan Gulf, for example, there are at least three types, whose meaning is entirely different. In one case they are used for amusement, and are not in any way secret,

being usually made in imitation of some animal or material object. Another quite different type of mask is worn by the boys, whenever they appear in public, during the period in which they are being initiated into manhood. This period lasts for several months, and during that time they must remain within a special house built for this purpose, being allowed to go out only when they are covered and concealed, with the exception of their legs and feet, by these masks. A third type of mask appears only on the occasion of certain special ceremonies, and represents certain spirits or deities supposed to be present in connection with these ceremonies. In this region all the masks are made of a framework of split bamboo covered with painted bark-cloth similar to the South Sea Island tapa, though not so well made. The three types, while showing great variation within the type, are still quite characteristic, so any masked figure could be instantly placed in the group to which it belonged.

In other districts the masks are quite different, and made in a different way, though there is nearly always a framework of split bamboo or rattan. Sometimes a grotesque head and face is tightly woven of rattan. This may or may not be painted, or covered with mud or clay. On the north coast over a considerable area, the face is represented by a wooden carving. This may be a close imitation of the human features, or a grotesque caricature of the same. This mask proper is usually fastened to the framework which covers the head so the bearer can look through the eye-holes. This is true in the case of the large feather masks, where the bamboo frame is very high and covered with feathers. This is probably the most striking of all New Guinea types of masks, and may be regarded as a combination of the mask with the ornamental feather head-dresses used in dances, which are often quite large and elaborate, and also vary greatly in different

MASKS SUCH AS ARE WORN IN IMITATIVE OR HUMOROUS DANCES, PAPUAN GULF, NEW GUINEA.

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MASK WORN IN PUBLIC BY BOY DURING INITIATION PERIOD,
PAPUAN GULF, NEW GUINEA.

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MASKS REPRESENTING SPIRITS USED ONLY IN CONNECTION WITH SPECIAL CEREMONIES, PAPUAN GULF, NEW GUINEA.

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regions. The carved face varies considerably from district to district, some being characterized by huge curved noses, others by long pointed ones, etc. The framework to which the face is fastened and the material with which the frame is covered also vary, feathers being used in only a limited district. Bark, leaves, grass and fiber coverings are also used. Often the leaves are fresh, so it is impossible to preserve the mask as a whole; while usually a certain number of fresh leaves, and often flowers, are added.

The feather masks shown in the frontispiece are among the largest, if not the largest, known to occur in New Guinea. These masks represent local deities, who visit the village on the occasion of certain special ceremonies. There is less secrecy connected with them than with most masks of this type. I had the opportunity of seeing the preparation of these masks, and witnessing part of the ceremonies. There was no objection whatever to my entering the enclosure where the masks were made, or witnessing any of the proceedings, and I could doubtless have seen everything that took place if I had stayed in the village during the whole period. There were many visitors from neighboring villages, who viewed the performance in much the same way that the onlookers would view a modern religious procession in Rome, for example.

The village where this took place is named Awar, and is one of four or five small neighboring villages, all belonging to the same tribe or linguistic group, the total number of individuals probably not exceeding one thousand. The villages are situated on or near Hansa Bay, a few miles west of Potsdam Harbor, on the north coast of New Guinea. The ceremony occurs about once a year, being held in the different villages in rotation, but the people of all the villages attend each ceremony. The preparation of the masks takes several months; for, while the feathers and ornaments are kept from

year to year, a new framework has to be made, and each feather carefully fastened in place.

First a peek-proof enclosure is made in front of and surrounding one of the large men's houses, as there is no special house for this purpose. The enclosing fence is about as high as the masks, and is made of palm or other leaves. Within this enclosure, in the shade of the large projecting front of the house, the frame is constructed, and most of the feathers put in place, but for finishing touches the masks are carefully set up on supports under a special high shed, made for the purpose.

Of course, no important affair ever takes place in New Guinea without a big feast, and for a week or two before the performance everybody is busy collecting provisions. In this all the villages unite, though the main work falls on the entertaining village. Several days are spent in washing out sago, one or two in a big fishing expedition along the beach or in the lagoons. Then there is a big pig-hunt, and often a voyage to Menam or some other place to buy pigs and other provisions.

The village of Awar, where the ceremony was to be held, is made up of a number of houses scattered at intervals along and on both sides of a single street, which in fact is nothing but a native path that has been widened and cleared of vegetation in the neighborhood of the houses. Shortly before the ceremony, frames are erected near the houses along the street, and on these all kinds of food materials are placed, so that everyone may see what an abundance of food is supplied for the feast. This food consists chiefly of great bowls of taro and yams, packets of sago done up in leaves and ornamented with leaf streamers, and even pigs securely bound and fastened to poles, these being supported on forked stakes. Here the things remain, pigs and all, till needed, which may be for

WOMAN DANCING IN FRONT OF THE PROCESSION. FOOD BOWLS AND BASKETS ON RACK AT LEFT, AWAR, NEW GUINEA.

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one to several days, depending on the length of time the ceremonies and feasting which goes with them continue, which is usually as long as the food supply holds out.

The masks made on this occasion were four—two large ones covered with feathers, and two small ones covered with leaves, chiefly coconut leaves. The two smaller ones represented two females, Kangai and Gimor; and the two large ones, their sons, Guembe, the son of Kangai, and Korai, the son of Gimor. These have their home in a fine house in the bottom of a lagoon not far away, and visit the village at the time of the ceremony, appearing to the people in the form of these masks.

At last the time arrived when the spirits were to appear in the village, and a great crowd of people, young and old, assembled along the street near the enclosure. For some time the big drums or wooden gongs, as well as shell trumpets and hand-drums, could be heard within, when suddenly a portion of the leafy fence was thrown to one side, and the masks and attendants or dancers who made up the procession were seen advancing slowly through the opening. In front were four men in their finest ornaments, then a large mask, followed by three more men; then the second large mask attended in a similar way, and last, the two small masks side by side. The men carried *kundus* ("hand-drums") or beat two coconut shells together to mark the rhythm of the dance, which was a slow 4/4 movement. First, one foot is advanced slightly, usually considerably to one side, then the other taps the ground alongside, then is stamped down firmly, then a rest; after which the movement is repeated with the other foot, and so on. Meanwhile everybody sings, including the audience. When asked what it meant, they declared it was merely a "sing-sing," and nobody knew what the meaning was. Those in front

would often turn around and face the masks. During the singing of what might be called a stanza there was very little forward movement. After this they would advance a little, sing another stanza, and so on, thus slowly proceeding from one end of the village to the other, and back to the enclosure. As soon as the procession was inside, the opening was closed. Then the masks were removed from the bearers and carefully placed under their sheds. The other performers removed their special ornaments, and all retired for a rest till meal time. The whole performance lasted from one to two hours, and was repeated twice a day, weather permitting, in the early forenoon and late afternoon, as long as the spirits remained in the village (while the food supply held out).

The number of dancers and attendants varied from time to time, and sometimes women took part in the procession. At some time during the performance there was placed in front of each mask one of the bound hogs and great numbers of bundles of taro, yams, and other food. After a short ceremony, this was removed and taken away to be cooked and eaten, though not everything that was eaten was offered in this way.

The smaller masks did not always appear in the procession, nor did they seem to have any special honor, as during the performance the women would often talk to them, and even slapped them in the face. Between the main performances one or both of the small masks would come out with sticks and run around the village. All the young men and boys took to their heels, and if one got anywhere nearby, a stick was thrown at him.

During one performance on the afternoon of the second day, which I saw, a woman dancer indulged in a special fit of scolding, or at least appeared to do so, and was answered by two old men who

REAR OF THE PROCESSION WITH THE TWO SMALL MASKS, AWAR, NEW GUINEA.

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were among the spectators. This continued for ten minutes or more. The woman would come out and talk excitedly for some time, stamping the ground with her foot and swinging her arms, and then the men, one or both, would answer, running around the dancers in an excited manner. I was told the woman was scolding the men for killing so many pigs and using up so much taro. She said they had already had enough, and should not kill any more pigs. Shortly after a man came with a bunch of bananas and made an excited speech while he ran around the procession and beat the bunch on the ground, scattering the bananas in all directions. This was apparently an offering to the masks.

The ceremonies closed on the evening of the fifth day. After a short performance about 3:30 to 4:30 p. m., the masks returned to the enclosure. Then all the women and children disappeared from the village. After ten or fifteen minutes the shell trumpets were heard giving a peculiar wailing sound, and the procession again came out and proceeded with trumpets to the end of the village. Here they stopped, and the trumpets proceeded on slowly down to the lagoon. Meanwhile, a number of men with spears took their places near the masks, and at a certain signal the spears were thrown into the masks which were then thrown down ("killing the masks," so they said). The men declined to give any further information. The trumpets gradually got weaker, to make the women and children think the *tamburans* ("spirits") were going back to their house in the lagoon, so my interpreter said. The masks were then immediately dismantled, and the feathers and ornaments put away for future use. The frame was destroyed, so that no sign of the masks remained anywhere to be seen. I left before this was quite completed, and, as I passed the enclosure, there was still one man blowing away on a shell trumpet. No woman or child was to be seen anywhere near the village.

ALBERT B. LEWIS.

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